

# PAUATAHANUI

## THE MAKING OF A RESERVE



*An exciting Society project is now underway to restore a 43-hectare marshland reserve for wading and shoreline birds at the head of Pauatahanui Inlet near Wellington. New Zealand wading and shoreline birds have not been widely recognised as being under threat and have often lost out due to massive drainage for farmland and reclamation. These birds are the larger portion of our rare and endangered native species.*

*The project is long term with the first phase up to 1986; the completion of facilities for visitors, and tracks and hides, is now the focus of a national appeal launched by the Society to raise \$35,000. David Collingwood, prior to retiring from Head Office, was jointly responsible for this project and here he describes the reserve and the work of the Society members in developing it.*

**F**rom the rise behind Pauatahanui Cottage one gazes over a landscape of reeds and glistening pools left by the tide.

Pauatahanui Cottage is the oldest building in the historic village of Pauatahanui. Built in 1860 by Thomas Hollis Stace, the cottage nestles below the rise which originally housed Ngatitōa chief Te Rangihāeata's pa 'Matai taua'. The pa site was later taken for the 58th Regimental Stockade in 1846 and now is occupied by St Albans Church.

The cottage, now owned by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, has been renovated with the financial assistance of the Stout Trust, while the garden is being developed as a typical settler's garden of the 1860s. The premises are the base for the Society in its day-to-day management of the Pauatahanui Wildlife Management Reserve, which is across the road from the cottage.

Kawhia Harbour and Farewell Spit are the nearest comparable sized areas for wading and migratory birds on the west coast, and although godwits and knots once used Pauatahanui for their New Zealand sojourn, they became seasonal visitors because of man-made disturbances to the habitat. Some years ago the land was extensively drained to produce a cricket ground, a go-cart track, to enable stock grazing and to prevent flooding of neighbouring properties. This has affected almost all of the reserve.

These intrusions have largely become derelict; nature and its tides have gradually overwhelmed the go-cart track and the cricket ground, and the drains are now mostly clogged with rushes. Although evidence of trappings by cattle and sheep still remain in pockets of oozy mud, nature is re-asserting itself and turning the place into a potentially rich area for both plants and animals.

The final modification was the burying of the Kapuni Gas pipeline to Wellington in a trench right across the site in the 1970s. This disturbance was beneficial, however, as it cleared reeds along the easement for the pipeline, thus producing valuable pools and loafing areas for birdlife. (The Society is carefully weeding the route, and whitefaced herons, spur-winged plovers, pied stilts and banded dotterels use it as valuable habitat.)

Surprisingly, these major man-made modifications seem to be a boon for the birdlife now that nature has re-established its dominance.

### The search

In 1979 Brian Ellis — our ICBP representative at the time — and I commenced the search for a suitable area to establish a wading bird reserve in the lower North Island. We examined several locations but finally opted for Pauatahanui. With the approval of the Executive, and with President Tony Ellis's enthusiastic interest, we approached Bing Lucas, who is now

**A pied stilt, delicately perched on one leg. Winter sunset, Pauatahanui Reserve.**

Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon

Director-General of Lands, with our proposal.

Much has flowed from this meeting; the Domain Board, which had responsibility for Pauatahanui Domain (as the area was then known), voted itself out of office and the area was gazetted as a Reserve for Government Purposes. The intention to vest day-to-day management in Forest and Bird was advertised and the Society was charged with the preparation of a draft management plan.

This is a unique arrangement, the first time in New Zealand that a voluntary body has been given the day-to-day management of a Crown reserve.

After protracted legal proceedings, and with the considerable assistance of Keith Owen of the Wildlife Service, the draft management plan was finally approved in August 1984. This enabled the Society work on the reserve to start in earnest. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Dr Peter Tapsell, formally handed the management over on May 13, 1985.

### Gum-booted efforts

Initially a new fence was erected along the north-eastern boundary by Society members to prevent stock from wandering all over the reserve.

During the last week of September and first week of October 1984 very high equinoctial tides coincided with our building of the water control structure.